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ABSTRACT

This study examined the possibility that children's participation in a sexual abuse prevention program would lead to an increase in their fears of sexual abuse, benign touches, and normal childhood situations. Also examined was the relation of children's knowledge of sexual abuse prevention concepts to their fears of sexual abuse. Participants were 117 three- to six-year-olds from four preschools. A sexual abuse prevention program that used interactive lessons and puppets was implemented. Before and after completion of the program, children were individually administered several measures. In terms of the program's effect on children's fear, results showed that neither the experimental group nor the control group revealed a significant increase in any type of fear. Also, children with greater fear of sexual abuse knew more prevention concepts at the time of pretesting than did children with less fear. It is suggested that a sexual abuse education program for preschoolers can be offered without incurring unreasonable fears in the children, and that being a little scared of sexual abuse does not inhibit children's ability to think constructively about sexual abuse prevention. Appended are 14 references and related materials. (GLR)

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ASSESSING PRESCHOOLERS' FEARS FOLLOWING A SEXUAL ABUSE EDUCATION PROGRAM

by

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INTRODUCTION

Parents and educators question whether learning about sexual abuse prevention elicits unnecessary fear in children. Hypothetically, sexual abuse education programs might affect children by increasing their fears in three areas: sexual abuse situations (for example, threat of children's private parts being touched), benign touch situations (such as hugs), and situations involving normal childhood fears (such as thunderstorms).

Several studies have addressed these questions. Regarding the first type of fear, one study found increases in sexual abuse fear whereas another did not (Ratto & Bogat, 1990; Garbarino, 1987, respectively). Furthermore, research suggests that children's fear of benign touch does not increase (Hazzard, Webb, Kleemeier, Angert, & Pohl, 1991; Wurtele, 1990; Wurtele, Currier, Gillispie, & Franklin, 1991; Wurtele, Kast, Miller-Perrin, & Kondrick, 1989; Wurtele & Miller-Perrin, 1987). And finally, except for one investigation (Wurtele et al., 1991), studies that have examined normal fears--which typically assess only children's fear of strangers--have not found increases (Binder & McNiel, 1987; Hazzard et al., 1991; Miller-Perrin & Wurtele, 1986; Miltenberger & Theisse-Duffy, 1988; Miltenberger, Thiesse-Duffy, Suda, Kozak, & Bruellman, 1990; Ratto & Bogat, 1990; Wurtele, 1990; Wurtele et al., 1989; Wurtele & Miller-Perrin, 1987).

These results are inconclusive. First, very few studies have examined any of the three types of fear. The only exceptions are "positive physical affection" and "strangers." Second, many of the studies suffer from methodological problems such as posttest only designs, lack of control groups, and small sample sizes. Third, measurement of sexual abuse, benign touch, and normal fears is usually limited to one or two questions. Thus, internal reliability and

external validity are compromised. Finally, all three types of fear have not been assessed simultaneously within one study. It cannot be assumed that children's level of fear in one type of situation will be the same as in other types of situations.

This study attempted to rectify these problems. Two research questions were posed. First, would participation in a prevention program lead to an increase in fears of sexual abuse, benign touch, and/or normal childhood situations, and, second, would children's knowledge of sexual abuse prevention concepts relate to their sexual abuse fears.

METHOD

Participants were 117 children from four preschools, ages three through six. They were matched for gender and randomly assigned to a treatment or delayed treatment control group. The intervention, named the Grossmont College Sexual Abuse Prevention Program (Behana, Gamble, Stevens, 1985), teaches the "NO, GO, TELL" message with interactive lessons and puppets during five, twenty-minute segments. Prior to and following completion of this program, children were individually administered several measures by examiners who were blind to their experimental condition.

One measure relevant to the present paper is the WIST (Saslawsky and Wurtele, 1986). Each child was asked to imagine him/herself in five hypothetical situations. There are four sexual abuse situations: a cousin who begins touching the child inappropriately while wrestling, an uncle who asks to take nude pictures of the child, a babysitter who bribes the child to touch her private parts, and a man in a park who bribes to touch the child. A fifth story involves appropriate touch, a parent who asks to touch a child's injured private parts.

Each story measures recognition of whether the touch is appropriate or not. The four sexual abuse stories measure a child's ability to verbally refuse the perpetrator, leave the situation, report sexual advances to someone, and make an informative disclosure to this person.

In addition to using the WIST, this study piloted a 20-item Childhood Fear Scale (CFS). The CFS asks children how scared they feel about various circumstances reflecting the three types of fear situations. They can answer either "very scared," "a little scared," or "not scared."

RESULTS

A preliminary factor analysis was conducted on the children's pretest CFS responses using a four factor solution with a principal components analysis and a varimax rotation. However, due to the fact that only the items in the first factor conceptually fit together (the sexual abuse items) and that only this subscale revealed an adequate internal consistency, the other items were slightly rearranged into two subscales: benign touch or normal childhood fears. Only one item was deleted because it did not fit into any of the three subscales; this left 19 items (see Figure 1).

All three subscales significantly correlated with one another with correlations ranging from .39 to .56. Paired t-tests revealed that both the mean of the sexual abuse and normal fear subscale were significantly higher than the mean of the benign touch subscale--higher scores represent more fear [sexual abuse and benign fear $t(115) = 8.82$, $p < .01$; benign touch and normal fear $t(115) = -11.18$, $p < .01$; sexual abuse and normal fear $t(115) = .16$, $p > .10$] (see Figure 2).

Program Effects on Children's Fear

To assess the first research question--whether children would reveal an increase in fear of sexual abuse, benign touch, and/or normal childhood fear situations due to their involvement in a sexual abuse prevention curriculum--a 2 X 2 repeated measures MANOVA (Condition X Time) was conducted using all three CFS subscales as the dependent variables. Neither the experimental group nor the control group revealed a significant increase in any type of fear [$F(1,109) = .232$ $p > .10$].

Children's Fear and Knowledge

Although participating in the prevention curriculum did not seem to influence children's fears, it is possible that children's fear of sexual abuse situations might relate to their knowledge of sexual abuse concepts--and their ability to learn about sexual abuse prevention. In order to test this second research question, children were divided into high and low fear groups, using a median split, on the pretest sexual abuse subscale.

A repeated measures ANOVA (condition, sexual abuse fear, and time) using WIST knowledge LEVELS--the nine hierarchical levels described by Liang and McGrath (1991)--as the dependent variable was conducted. There was a main effect for SEXUAL ABUSE FEAR [$F(1,80)=7.69$, $p < .01$)]: children in the high fear groups for sexual abuse scored significantly higher on knowledge than children in the low fear group (see Figure 3). There was also a significant SEXUAL ABUSE FEAR by TIME interaction [$F(1,80)=4.33$, $p < .05$): children with a high fear of sexual abuse situations increased in knowledge over time, whereas children with a low fear slightly decreased in knowledge (see Figure 4).

DISCUSSION

This study was a first attempt to assess simultaneously children's self-reported fears of sexual abuse, benign touch, and normal fear situations. Preschoolers' fears of these three types of situations did not increase after participating in the program. This finding may begin to allay parents and educators's concern that sexual abuse education programs might instill unnecessary fear in children.

This study also found that children with greater fear of sexual abuse knew more prevention concepts at pretest than children with less fear. Furthermore, these high fear children gained even more knowledge over time, whereas the low fear children did not. Therefore, it is possible that a slight elevation of sexual abuse fear may be beneficial to understanding prevention. Fearing sexual abuse situations may motivate children to learn more about prevention skills either through an education program or, for those who did not receive a curriculum, through parents or other means. It is also possible that another variable not measured in this study, such as intelligence, may be influencing both children's fear of sexual abuse and their knowledge of sexual abuse prevention.

In conclusion, this investigation initiated a comprehensive assessment of children's fears in relation to sexual abuse prevention. The findings suggest that preschoolers can be taught a sexual abuse education program without incurring unreasonable fears and that being a little scared of sexual abuse does not inhibit children's ability to think constructively about sexual abuse prevention. More evidence is needed to support the results of this study and to better understand the relationship between sexual abuse fear and prevention knowledge, as well as provide further validation of the newly developed Childhood Fear Scale.

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FIGURE 1

SAMPLE ITEMS FOR THE CFS SUBSCALE

SEXUAL ABUSE FEAR (5 items) alpha = .72

1. SOMEONE ASKING YOU IF THEY CAN TOUCH YOUR PRIVATE PARTS
2. SOMEONE ASKING IF THEY COULD TAKE PICTURES OF YOU WITH NO CLOTHES ON

BENIGN TOUCH FEAR (5 items) alpha = .57

1. SOMEONE YOU KNOW GIVING YOU A HUG
2. SOMEONE HELPING YOU TO GET DRESSED

NORMAL CHILDHOOD FEAR (9 items) alpha = .72

1. THUNDERSTORMS
2. SOMEONE YOU DON'T KNOW TALKING TO YOU

FIGURE 2

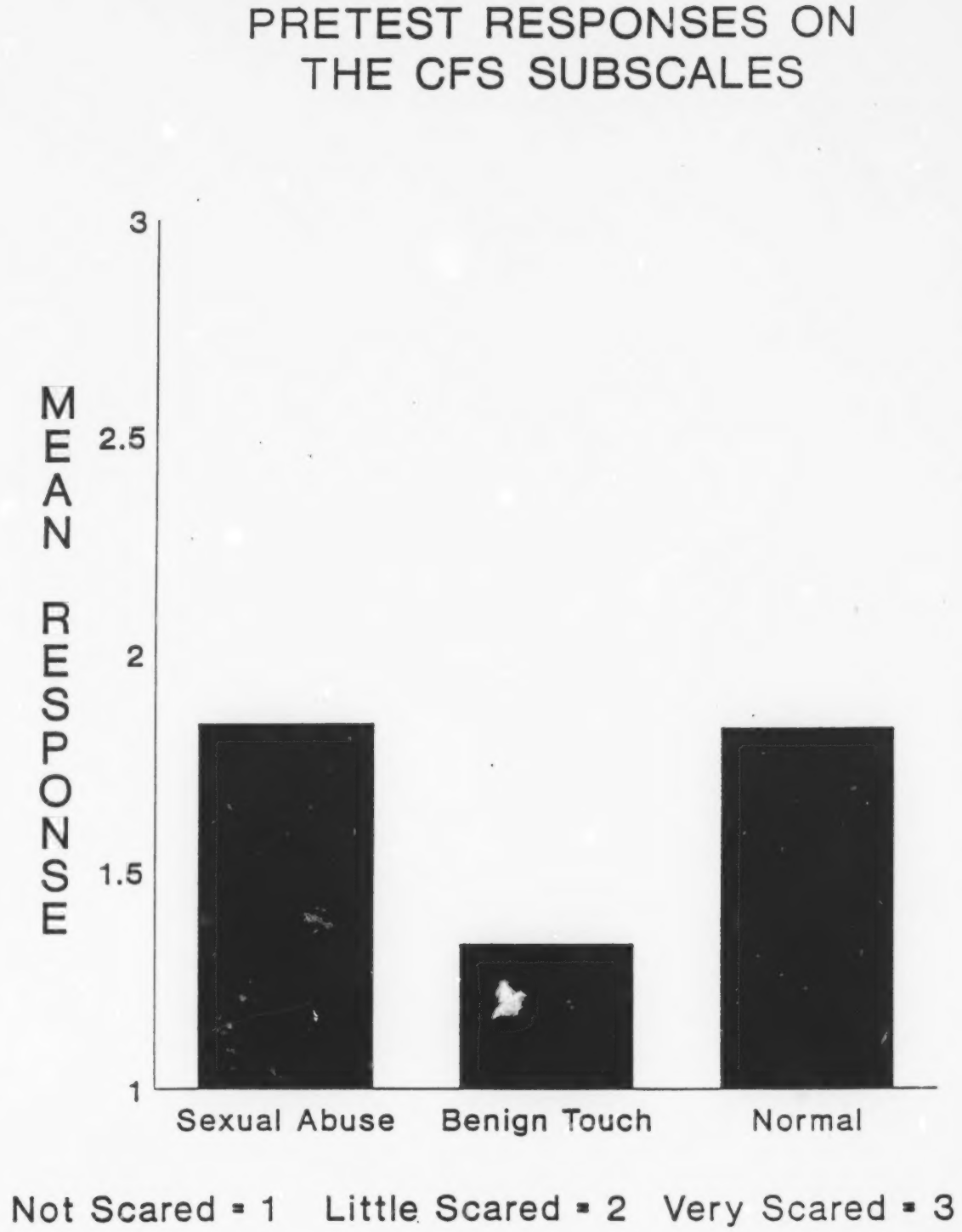
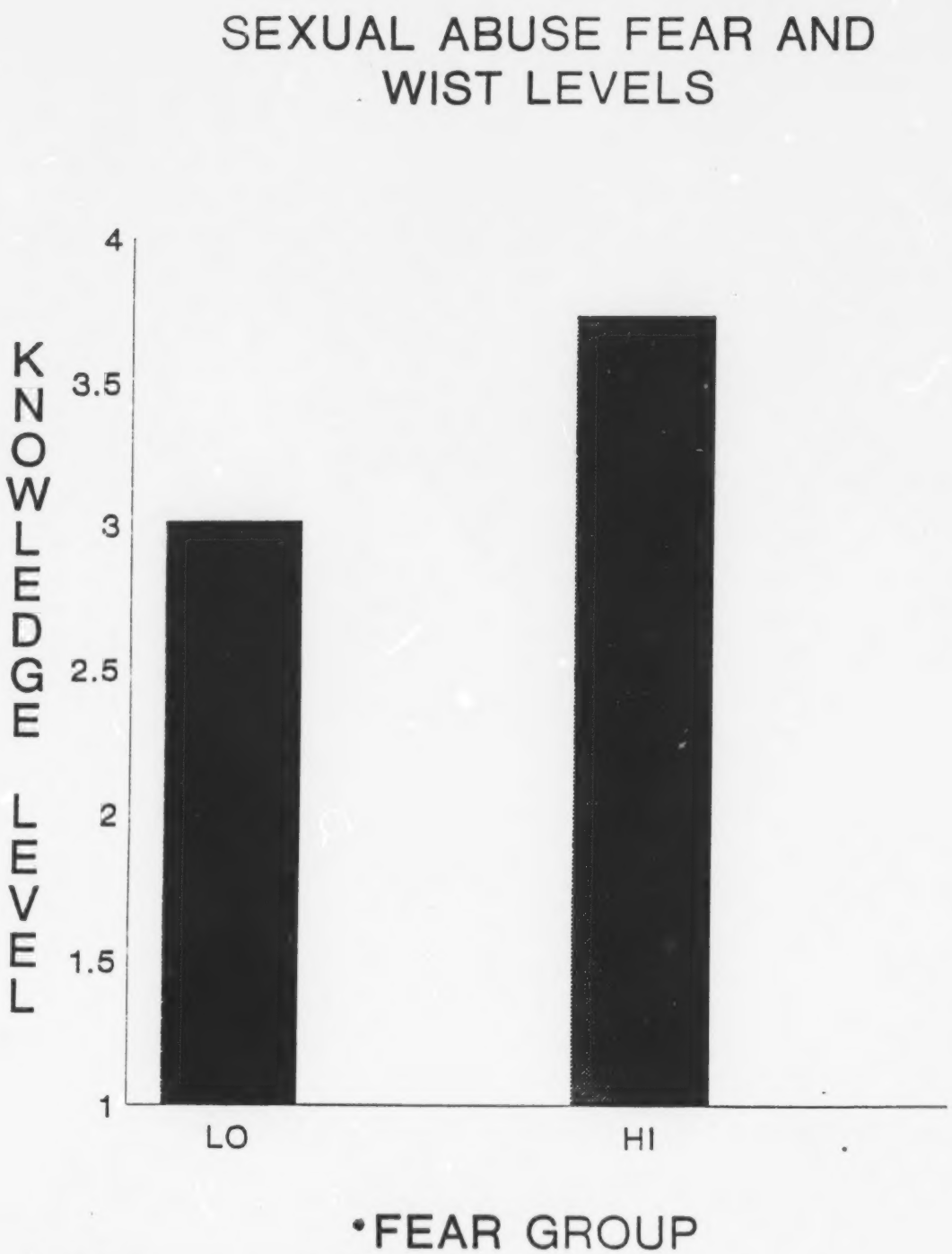

PRETEST RESPONSES ON
THE CFS SUBSCALES
MEAN RESPONSE
3
2.5
2
1.5
1
Sexual Abuse
Benign Touch
Normal
Not Scared = 1
Little Scared = 2
Very Scared = 3

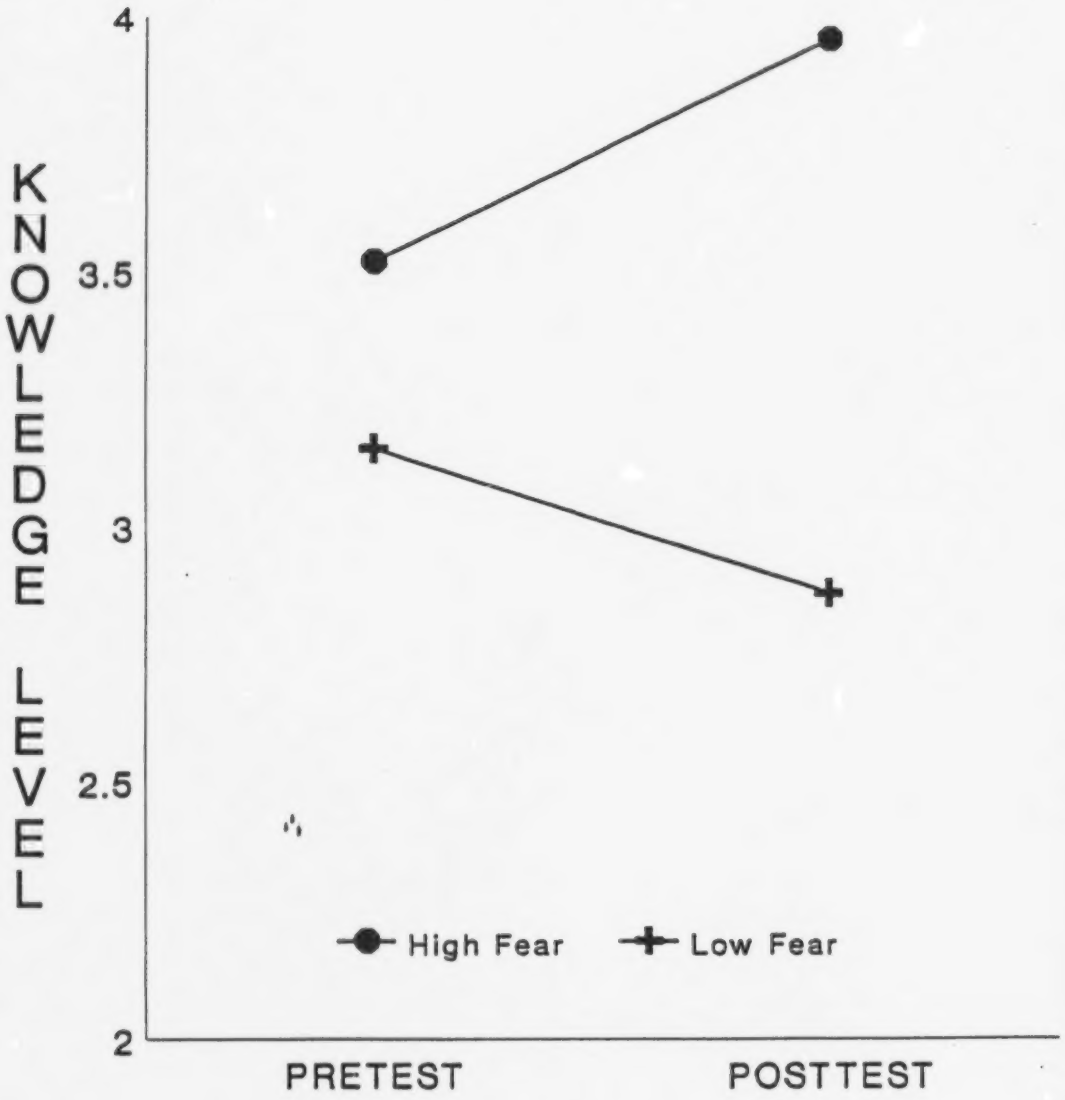
FIGURE 3



$F = 7.69, \quad p < .01$

FIGURE 4

SEXUAL ABUSE FEAR AND TIME INTERACTION FOR WIST LEVELS



$F = 4.33, \quad p < .05$